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Solon Charges Telephone Tap

Federal Investigation of Practice Asked

By MARK BROWN

WASHINGTON (AP) — Sen. Carl T. Curtis, R-Neb., charged Friday widespread eavesdropping on telephone conversations of government employees was begun under the Johnson administration and he asked for a Justice Department investigation.

Curtis, in a Senate speech, singled out the General Services Administration and the Interior Department as two agencies in which he had evidence of bugging.

The Nebraska Republican claimed a "clique" in the GSA had listened in on phone conversations in an effort to "pave the way for favoritism in awarding contracts."

The GSA, the government's housekeeping agency, among other duties handles contracts for government buildings and supplies.

LESS SPECIFIC

He was less specific about such activities in the Interior Department, but his allegation prompted Secretary Walter J. Hickel to call for an immediate FBI probe.

Curtis said the current GSA "snooper button" on his telephone and was told by a secretary she was ordered to monitor every telephone call to or from his office, Curtis said.

head, Robert Kunzig, had ordered an end to the practice May 6, but it was "so widespread that it has been impossible to root out in the six months that the Nixon administration has been in office."

The former head of the GSA, Lawson B. Knott Jr., said Curtis' allegation was news to him and added: "I'd be very much interested in seeing the evidence."

Curtis later told a reporter he has known about the practice since early spring, adding: "This malodorous practice started under the previous administration."

SAME MAN

The same man who told him about eavesdropping in the GSA mentioned it also was happening in the Interior Department, Curtis said.

Hickel said any "bugging or covert monitoring of conversations—telephone or otherwise—must be uncovered and dealt with swiftly and severely."

The senator identified the source of his information as a "Mr. X," a GSA official.

Mr. X had discovered a

phone and was told by a secretary she was ordered to monitor every telephone call to or from his office, Curtis said.

Curtis' mystery source was told the telephone company installed the devices, ostensibly so a secretary could take notes on conversations without introducing background office noise, he said.

ECONOMIC MOTIVE

"There could well be an economic motive for this high level of eavesdropping," said Curtis, noting that the GSA lets many government contracts.

Otherwise the motive might be political, "of the cheap, bureaucratic, gutter fighting variety," he said.

Mr. X told him the practice was widespread in the Interior Department, too, Curtis said.

"This type of eavesdropping and electronic snooping—where there is not the slightest pretext that the national security is involved—must stop," he said.

Hickel said he was asking "any employee of the department who has been instructed to monitor calls without the knowledge of both parties to the conversation to step forward and report to me immediately."